

# Gumbrecht, Faulkner and the presence of heat

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**Gumbrecht, Faulkner and the Presence of Heat**

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### Abstract

In setting out to examine the existence of presence, as opposed to meaning, in literature this essay draws on the work of Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht whose recent record of publications has formed a sustained response to this issue. Situating Gumbrecht's work within two contexts – its debt to a phenomenological heritage and its congruence with more recent literary criticism – the essay argues for a renewed emphasis on presence via the concept of mood or *stimmung*. It then seeks to extend Gumbrecht's work by offering an interpretation of William Faulkner's 1932 novel *Light in August* which concentrates upon the palpable presence (*stimmung*) of heat which it contains. The existence of this heat, it will be argued, depends upon elements of the text that initially appear meaningful – or, to utilise Gumbrecht's terminology, moments that are there primarily for their 'meaning effect' – but which analysis shows to be productive of presence. The essay concludes with a claim that what literary studies now requires is a re-ordering of the terms of emphasis in which discussions of meaning and presence are couched.

### Keywords

Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, William Faulkner, Presence, Mood, *Stimmung*, Atmosphere, Heat, *Light in August*

### Word Count

7,982 words

## Gumbrecht, Faulkner and the Presence of Heat

Rather than having to think, always and endlessly, what else there could be, we sometimes seem to connect with a layer in our existence that simply wants the things of the world close to our skin.<sup>1</sup>

Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht

It was hot; heat quivered up from the asphalt, giving to the familiar buildings about the square a nimbus quality, a quality of living and palpitant chiaroscuro.<sup>2</sup>

William Faulkner

### Introduction

This essay is about the existence of certain forms of presence, as opposed to meaning, in literature and offers an account of how such presence is summoned. To do this is, in a certain sense, to take part in a new approach to study in the humanities that has gained traction in the last few years. At the same time, it will be argued, it is to rediscover an interest and attempted validation of presence that has been a recurrent theme in modern philosophy and in literary criticism spanning several decades. Drawing these strands together makes for what will hopefully be an obvious structure. In the first half of the essay, the concept of presence, and its relationship to, or manifestation within, mood and atmosphere, will be set out via a detailed discussion of the work of Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, whose indebtedness to a philosophical heritage that includes, amongst others Martin Heidegger, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Hans Georg Gadamer and Walter Benjamin will be noted. The second half of the essay will then try to put these notions of presence into action with an analysis of William Faulkner's writing and in relation to a very particular atmosphere: namely, the presence of heat in his writing from the 1930s and exemplified in *Light in August* (1932). Ultimately, it will be argued that the terms of meaning and presence, rather

than being in fundamental conflict, are, in fact, deeply embedded in each other's effects. However, what is required, and what the work of Gumbrecht and others brings out, is the need for a re-ordering of the terms of emphasis in which literary discussions of meaning and presence are couched. That is to say, the presence of heat in Faulkner's writing will be argued to be a primary function of its status as literature and several instances of meaningful prose will be identified as contributing to the presence effect of heat which is produced. Rather than heat being meaningful, then, it is more appropriate to say that meaning, in Faulkner, is hot.

### **Presence, Mood, Atmosphere**

The current interest in presence within the humanities can, as with most academic movements, best be seen as a reaction to what is deemed a dominant approach which undermines or devalues its critical importance. For advocates of a return to presence, then, the humanities, and in particular the theory-inflected approaches taken in the last several decades by literary critics and historians, have been dominated by an interest in interpretation, representation and meaning that have, ultimately, produced discussions that revolve around absences as opposed to presences (with some of the key names here being Derrida, Gadamer, Rorty and White). In a recent collection on the theme of presence Ethan Kleinberg groups together an alternative selection of current thinkers which includes Michael Bentley, Ewa Domanska and Eelco Runia and quotes from Frank Ankersmit that 'it is certainly distressing that the liberation of philosophy from the narrow straights of transcendentalism that we may find in their [Derrida, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Rorty] writings did change so desperately little that it left the world of history, of representation, of our experience of art, music, and of the more existential aspects of the *condition humaine* as unexplained and devoid of philosophical interest as had been the case in the heyday of logical positivism'.<sup>3</sup>

One of the most prominent figures in this recent turn to presence, and certainly the most important in terms of literary aesthetics, is Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, who has, in works such as *Production of Presence* (2004), *Atmosphere, Mood, Stimmung* (2012) and *After 1945* (2013), mounted a sustained attack upon precisely the names and approaches alluded to by Ankersmit. Thus, Gumbrecht is particularly keen to undermine (or even dismantle) the status of interpretation and meaning in literary studies. Crucial to the interpretive approach he identifies is the sense in which criticism uncovers meaning from the surface text and the disinterested, ‘critical’, retrieval of such meaning is the valid goal of the literary critic. By this rationale, meaning is not only the unit of value but it is precisely what can only be accessed once casual, cursory (or to phrase this in less pejorative terms) immersive reading has been laid aside. In critical theory, the approach has been no less important, but has taken on a form in which the act of interpretation and the possibility of meaning has been problematized. Most radically in these accounts, Derrida’s work, summed up nicely by Mark Bevir, argues that ‘whenever we tie a signifier to a signified, the nature of both signifier and signified depends on something absent and other than itself’.<sup>4</sup> Though some would argue the point, and Bevir is one of those, deconstruction has appeared to prove that access to the presence of stable signifieds is impossible and, as such, we are left amidst a play of signifiers only – and the focus upon ‘absence’ which this has implied has, in particular, been taken up by literary criticism in the service of interpretive approaches which seem, ultimately, to prove nothing other than the nullity of interpretation. The apparent multiplicity of meaning within the play of signification has thus, to a large extent, drained those very meanings of vitality. Gumbrecht therefore argues that what began as radical theory has become an innately conservative approach that has dominated the academy. He writes: ‘for many years now, the smashing success of deconstruction has depended on every deconstructor’s willingness to hurl the charge of naivete, or at least of being “substantialist,” at whoever tries to argue in favor (*sic*) of a not exclusively meaning-based relationship to the world’.<sup>5</sup> A similar approach to critical method, and then its theoretical undermining, can be read

in the discipline of history, where the linguistic turn has also been significant and where notions of metahistory and narrative have undermined any attempt to recover the past.

But what would it mean to find a different way – a way out of interpretation and meaning? In terms of history the turn to material cultures (places and objects) has been significant. In describing this approach Ewa Domanska writes:

I am trying to rethink the material as aspects of traces of the past in a context other than semiotics, discourse theory, or representation theory, and to focus the analysis of those traces on an aspect that is marginalized or neglected by traditional notions of the source. That is, I mean to focus on the materiality or thingness of the trace rather than on its textuality and content.<sup>6</sup>

In fact, this approach has been significant in literary studies also and has been advanced through the work of Susan Stewart, Daniel Tiffany, Bill Brown, Peter Schwenger, Steven Connor and others.<sup>7</sup> The concomitant interest in affect that much of this work has shown, and which is explicitly worked through in Jonathan Flatley's recent *Affective Mapping* (2008), evidences an approach which has emphasised the intentional and emotive relationship between objects and human subjectivity.<sup>8</sup> This, in turn, has served to connect object or 'thing' studies with approaches which have, over a more prolonged period, focussed upon the body and seen a similar objection to 'linguistic' accounts as their starting point.<sup>9</sup> One of the key questions that these approaches bring up is the implied potential that certain forms of materiality have to transcend the net of language in which they are implicated. That is to say, the interest in materiality in historical reflection has been based upon the fact that an object can be held, touched, smelled and so on in a way that appears to bypass its construction in linguistic form

– its *representation*. But with literature this is precisely what cannot be bypassed. Literature is always a representation and, as such, can never escape the attribution of a certain form of meaning, swiftly followed by the attendant deconstructive slippage of such meaning – and thus a descent into non-referentiality and *absence*.

But the idea that literature is always a representation is precisely the notion to which this essay wants to apply pressure. And, for Gumbrecht, it is exactly this pressure, furthered through the reawakening of terms such as substance, presence, reality and Being – terms which, he argues, have ‘long been a symptom of despicably bad taste in the humanities’ – that he wants to activate in order to wrest the presence of a text from its meaning.<sup>10</sup> Despite making this claim, Gumbrecht’s work, at the same time, is part of a particular intellectual heritage which he both explicitly and implicitly references throughout his work – and the notion of presence is also identified as circulating in the most unlikely sources. Gumbrecht thus quotes from an interview with Hans-Georg Gadamer, the figurehead of philosophical hermeneutics and so, apparently, the archetypal example of an interpretative approach. Yet, upon being questioned about the meaning of poetry, Gadamer responds:

But - can we really assume that the reading of such texts is a reading exclusively concentrated on meaning? Do we not sing these texts? Should the process in which a poem speaks only be carried by a meaning intention? Is there not, at the same time, a truth that lies in its performance? This, I think, is the task with which the poem confronts us.<sup>11</sup>

This ‘other’ aspect of poetry – what Gadamer refers to as its ‘volume’ – is taken up by Gumbrecht in what he refers to in an earlier project as the ‘materialities of communication’ that bring meaning into the world. His way out of the deconstructive impasse, or way beyond absence is therefore found



through what William Eggington describes as a presence which is 'no longer the ultimate and pre-existing reference to material practices of various sorts, but designates instead the very materiality of those practices themselves. Presence, in the current sense, has become performance'. He thus attains to a description of presence which Eggington characterises as 'post-deconstructive'.<sup>12</sup>

The notion of 'materialities of communication' clearly resonates with an emphasis upon 'media' and thus connects Gumbrecht with another intellectual lineage.<sup>13</sup> However, what Eggington's reading of Gumbrecht really brings out is the sense in which the 'materiality' of literature is the very words on the page: that, rather than descriptions of objects, the materiality of the text is the sound, rhythm and tone of the words that make it up, divested of their semantic meaning. And this approach is indeed how Gumbrecht structures his own case studies, in readings of, amongst others, Shakespeare, Diderot and Mann which emphasise the presence of something other than semantic meaning in the poetry and prose of these writers.<sup>14</sup> Having said that, and in order to begin setting out a different potential for presence in literature than that proposed by Gumbrecht's analyses, it should be noted that he never argues for the complete eschewal of meaning and that he, in fact, continually stresses the existence of 'presence effects' and 'meaning effects'. Crucial to this assertion is the idea that the interest and valuation of presence is not all-consuming. Rather, Gumbrecht wants to 'conceive of aesthetic experience as an oscillation (and sometimes an interference) between "presence effects" and "meaning effects"'.<sup>15</sup> By this rationale, presence is never undiluted, never experienced completely divorced from a 'meaning effect' which inheres in its manifestation.

Where, then, can we think about presence residing within a text: from where could we say that its 'volume' emanates? One way of thinking about such questions is to consider them in terms of mood and atmosphere. To take these terms beyond the imprecision with which they are often used (there is

a mood of dread in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, an atmosphere of *ennui* in Moravia's *The Time of Indifference*) Gumbrecht asserts the usage of the German *stimmung* which can roughly be translated as mood or climate. In expanding upon this Gumbrecht writes:

'Mood' stands for an inner feeling so private it cannot be precisely circumscribed. 'Climate,' on the other hand, refers to something objective that surrounds people and exercises a physical influence. Only in German does the word connect with *Stimme* and *stimmen*. The first means "voice" and the second "to tune an instrument"; by extension, *stimmen* also means "to be correct." As the tuning of an instrument suggests, specific moods and atmosphere are experienced on a continuum, like musical scales.<sup>16</sup>

In paying close attention to the musical reference contained in these meanings, Gumbrecht writes of the complexity of haptic experience – the fact that we hear not just with our ears but in an activity that involves our whole bodies and in which we are 'surrounded'. He goes on: 'another dimension of reality that happens to our bodies in a similar way and surrounds them is the weather'.<sup>17</sup> Intimately physical, mood is literally an atmosphere that lightly touches and surrounds the body. At the same time, and perhaps precisely because of the very lightness of that touch, it is also encountered as interior, subjective and emotive. *Stimmung* thus captures a complex sense of overlapping effects, affects, *feelings*.

The intellectual heritage that makes much of this work on mood make sense is phenomenological – specifically Heideggerian. In Heidegger's thought, mood is not just a part of Being – rather, Being is encountered *in a mood*. As Heidegger writes: 'in a state-of-mind Dasein is always brought before itself, and has always found itself, not in the sense of coming across itself by perceiving itself, but in the sense of finding itself in the mood that it has'.<sup>18</sup> In opposition to a sense of modernist epiphany, mood is

omnipresent – one is always in some kind of mood – and, while moods assail us as an aspect of our existential thrownness, Heidegger explicitly states that they come ‘neither from "outside" nor from "inside", but arise out of Being-in-the-world, as a way of such Being’.<sup>19</sup> The importance that Gumbrecht finds in the connotations of *stimmung* are therefore directly related to a phenomenological project which seeks to collapse the division between subject and object and assert an intentional, phenomenological version of ‘things’. And this combination of supposed inner and outer forms an important feature of the revelatory aspect of mood. Heidegger writes that ‘*existentially, a state-of-mind implies a disclosive submission to the world*’ and that, ‘Dasein’s openness to the world is constituted existentially by the attunement of a state-of-mind’.<sup>20</sup>

Moods ‘attune’ us to the world in a very specific, recognizable way. As Jonathan Flatley puts it: ‘in a real sense, when one is experiencing shame, a different world is being perceived than when one is joyful or fearful’.<sup>21</sup> What Gumbrecht adds to this, and the other recent work that picks up on mood, is the intensely physical dimension he sees in it.<sup>22</sup> So, although slight, he is adamant about asserting the physical encounter that *stimmung* forms. It is through this idea that Gumbrecht furthers his critique of meaning, arguing that ‘a more important function of literary texts lies in the potential that their concreteness and historical immediacy hold’ and that ‘the skepticism of “constructivism” and the “linguistic turn” (which he associates with deconstruction and other poststructural theory) concerns only ontologies of literature based on the paradigm of representation. This does not matter when reading for atmospheres and moods: *they belong to the substance and reality of the world*’.<sup>23</sup>

Here we see the precise terms with which Gumbrecht wants to work and what sets his writing in a lineage which Vincent Pecora argues goes back to Nietzsche and the contrast between mimesis and representation.<sup>24</sup> According to this paradigm, representation is always one step removed from reality,

whereas mimesis offers some kind of direct relation to things in the world. Walter Benjamin's kabbalistic thinking on the access afforded by certain words, objects and artworks (the return to a pre-fallen world) forms a particularly significant branch in this line of thought. And Benjamin's thinking on the 'aura' of an artwork can also be read as the 'atmosphere' which surrounds it. Indeed, Gernot Bohme, who has recently postulated a theory of aesthetics based on the idea of a 'production of atmospheres', takes Benjamin's aura as one of his starting points, noting that Benjamin refers to the aura as a 'strange tissue of space and time' and that the 'aura is clearly something which flows forth spatially, almost something like a breath or a haze - precisely an atmosphere. Benjamin says that one "breathes" the aura. This breathing means that it is absorbed bodily, that it enters the bodily economy of tension and expansion, that one allows this atmosphere to permeate the self'.<sup>25</sup> What the consideration of the aura in these terms brings out is the mood of art and, given Benjamin's concerns noted above, its mimetic (as opposed to representational) potential: the way in which, as Jean-Luc Nancy has it, the arts mark 'the coming into presence of some *presence*'.<sup>26</sup> What still remains an open question, and which was posed earlier in this essay, is how a literary work of art could contain such dominating presence when the primary tools of meaning (words) are the sole matter of its content. The answer to this question which is offered by Gumbrecht, mentioned earlier, is that language contains more than its semantic meaning – that the structures, sounds and tone of poetic language produce presence independently of meaning. The second half of this essay will posit a different approach based on the presence created by what appear at first glance to be meaningful elements.

### **Faulkner's Heat**

In drawing upon a range of philosophers and theorists from the past century, Gumbrecht's thinking may help to reawaken discussion of presence in literature. But to do so it must also be advanced by actually seeing, or feeling, such presence in action – by, to alter and so oppose Peter Brooks

well-known formulation, ‘reading for the mood’ of texts.<sup>27</sup> In order to attempt such a reading this essay will argue that much of William Faulkner’s prose contains a quite particular *stimmung*. Subtly different to ‘mood’, *stimmung* will, in this instance, be taken in its most physical sense, as the light touch upon the skin of weather conditions and atmospheric states. Rather than a *mood* of anger, or hate, or longing, then, this essay will argue that Faulkner’s writing is imbued with a *stimmung* of heat. This can be seen across a range of his texts from the 1930s and reference will be made to his novels *As I Lay Dying* (1930), *Sanctuary* (1931), *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936) and *The Wild Palms* (1939) as well as his short-story ‘Dry September’ (1931). To avoid the discussion becoming too disparate, these references will be made in relation to a central text, *Light in August* (1932), which is in many ways exemplary of the atmospheric condition that is being examined. To be clear about the line being taken here, the argument is not that Faulkner *represents* heat – rather what is being promoted is the notion that his writing *presences* heat.

Metaphor, with its openly representational, interpretive, form has been the most common way in which criticism has tackled literary weather conditions, or indeed other aspects of the natural world, and the same applies with Faulkner. So, even in a recent ‘ecocritical’ collection (itself part of a movement away from linguistically-dominant theories) the predominant mode of analysis finds race, history and environmentalism in descriptions of the Southern landscape.<sup>28</sup> While many critics have also noted the importance of weather in Faulkner, the one full-length scholarly article on the subject of Faulkner and heat, by Marie Liénard, also follows the same course, albeit setting out with something quite like Gumbrecht’s formulation.<sup>29</sup> Liénard begins by writing of an ‘oscillation between the metonymical (objective reality of a climactic phenomenon) and the metaphorical’.<sup>30</sup> However, she very quickly departs from this dual focus by talking about how this oscillation ‘produces a doubling at the level of *meaning*’ and the analysis is then very much geared towards a reading of Faulkner’s prose

that sees heat as ‘meaning’ something else – something more important such as concepts like violence, racism and suffering.<sup>31</sup> What I want to contrast this with is the idea that the atmosphere or *stimmung* of heat in Faulkner’s writing is primary rather than instrumental – it is not there to refer to, or promote, something else but is, in fact, the essential, phenomenal, reality in which Faulkner’s world is given.<sup>32</sup>

Liénard’s epigraph, from an article by William Styron, comes closer to articulating this innate presence.

In experiencing the summer Mississippi heat Styron writes:

it is a monumental heat, heat so desolating to the body and spirit as to have the quality of a half-remembered bad dream, until one realizes that it has, indeed, been encountered before, in all those novels and stories of Faulkner through which this unholy weather - and other weather more benign - moves with almost touchable reality.<sup>33</sup>

When Styron writes of ‘encountering’ heat in Faulkner and of its ‘touchable reality’ he is asserting precisely the presence that this essay wants to examine. But if this assertion of heat’s presence is taken seriously then the obvious question to ask is how it comes into being. The intuitive answer to this – that his texts contain long passages of descriptive prose– fails to convince as, in fact, the writing on this matter is often quite bare. Sentences such ‘it was hot; the old people said that it was the hottest spell which the town had ever known’ are an example of the norm in this sense.<sup>34</sup> Allied to this, though, is the way in which heat is more indirectly implied through descriptions of physical characteristics and environmental conditions which emphasise a prolonged exposure to the sun. Such depiction, as it builds up cumulatively, appears to blend the literal and figurative. In *As I Lay Dying*, for instance, Cash is described as having ‘the print of his hat [...] sweated into his hair’, while Jewel has eyes which looked ‘like pieces of burnt-out cinder fixed in his face, looking out over the land’.<sup>35</sup> In this way, peripheral

characters such as Tommy from *Sanctuary* ('He had a sunburned thatch of hair, matted and foul. He had pale furious eyes, a short soft beard like dirty gold in colour') become subtly united yet distinguished from more central figures such as Joe Christmas: 'his face was gaunt, the flesh a level dead parchment colour. Not the skin: the flesh itself, as though the skull had been moulded in a still and deadly regularity and then baked in a fierce oven'.<sup>36</sup>

More blatant repetitions are also important. In *Light in August*, for instance, there are over a dozen counts of characters sweating, or wiping sweat from their skin, or wearing sweat-stained clothes. Even greater levels of perspiration per page suffuse 'Dry September', which is also filled with the dust underfoot of a land that has been baked dry. This dust is common to all the texts referred to in this essay, though it morphs into an abundant sand, located at Goodwin's place in the early chapters of *Sanctuary*. The 'fanning' of Addie Bundren's body by her daughter, Dewey Dell, is an almost constant refrain in the first half of *As I Lay Dying* and, especially during scenes at nightfall, 'the drowsy dissonance of cicada and cricket.', with the attendant heat required to make them so populous, is often evoked.<sup>37</sup> Much of these effects are encapsulated in the following description from *The Wild Palms*:

he (the convict) would sit on his naked heels, sweating steadily, his face worn and calm, immersed and indomitable, his bowed back raw and savage as beef beneath the suppurant old blisters and the fierce welts of tails, and scrape and chip at the charred sapling which was almost a paddle now, pausing now and then to raise his head while the cloud of mosquitoes about it whined and whirled.<sup>38</sup>

What is noticeable about this passage is its lack of the word 'heat' or 'hot' in favour of a description of a body and landscape that have been inescapably moulded by the sun's rays, with this effect heightened when considered in the context of repetition which it contributes to.

Such a use of repetition recalls Frank Kermode's 1981 essay 'Secrets and Narrative Sequence' which argues that the constant drive for sequentiality from readers suppresses those aspects of prose-fiction which do not follow a logic of B follows A but accumulate effects non-sequentially. Much like the way in which Gumbrecht talks of mood often remaining latent in a text, Kermode suggests that 'secrets', despite having profound effects, normally go unnoticed by both readers and critics. Yet, despite the brilliance of Kermode's insight, when it comes to Faulkner his approach cannot be fully replicated as the identification of 'secrets' is not enough. That is to say that while bare description, allusion and repetitive sweat and dust are part of the effect – part of the presence that Faulkner's text brings into being – they do not offer a complete account. Description and repetition, rather, offer the cold statements of heat as opposed to birthing the presence of a *stimmung* of heat. Or, to utilise Heideggerian terminology, they make for the conceptual 'present-at-hand' of temperature rather than 'unconcealing' a *Dasein* that finds itself in heat.

What can move further towards such unconcealment is a more precise, phenomenological, consideration of the light touch which *stimmung* (as the touch of a meteorological atmosphere) forms. In order to do this, an examination of two brief passages from Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* is instructive. Merleau-Ponty actually furthers a great deal of his philosophy of embodiment via the consideration of touch: in particular his analysis of one hand touching another which, primarily, brings out the distinction between touching and being touched. In fact, considering the active hand is to consider the body in movement which Merleau-Ponty argues allows us to 'see better how it inhabits space (and, moreover, time) because movement is not limited to submitting passively to space and time, it actively assumes them, it takes them up in their basic significance which is obscured in the commonplaceness of established situations'.<sup>39</sup> By contrast, a later passage on tactile experience reads



as follows:

There are tactile phenomena, alleged tactile qualities, like roughness and smoothness, which disappear completely if the exploratory movement is eliminated. Movement and time are not only an objective condition of knowing touch, but a phenomenal component of tactile data. [...] It is true that passive touch (for example touch inside the ear or nose, and generally in all parts of the body ordinarily covered) tells us hardly anything but the state of our own body and almost nothing about the object. Even on the most sensitive parts of our tactile surface, pressure without movement produces a scarcely identifiable phenomenon.<sup>40</sup>

While there are several ideas intersecting in this short passage the two key points in the current context are to do with stasis and passivity. Firstly, the slight touch formed by climate (*stimmung*) is one that is experienced passively on the part of the subject. The heat *touches me* rather than the other way around – so the extremity of heat renders the subject passive in a quite fundamental way. Secondly, and as part of this passivity, as heat surrounds and envelops the subject it makes movement in some sense impossible – we can only move ‘through’ the heat rather than across it or over it in such a way as to render it an object of knowledge. We can never grasp it. We are stuck in it both spatially and temporally (Merleau-Ponty’s comments on the moving, knowing, hand having clearly aligned it with an experience of time as well as space).

Considering this sense of light touch offers a new way to consider something that is often apparent in Faulkner’s prose: namely, the array of ways in which characters are portrayed in terms of passivity and stasis. In its comical guise this sees a figure such as Anse Bundren beset by a crippling laziness (and avoidance of sweat) that prohibits activity – he is described as not having ‘been in town in twelve

years'.<sup>41</sup> But it is also a sinister presence, especially in *Sanctuary* whose opening pages see Popeye and Benbow 'squatted so, facing one another across the spring, for two hours' apparently unable to move, and whose middle section describes the paralyzing confinement of Temple Drake, who appears unable to act to her benefit in any significant way.<sup>42</sup> In *The Wild Palms*, the 'anonymous identical hierarchy of the lost days' in which Wilbourne fritters away his college fund is explicitly considered in terms of the weather:

Yes, he thought, it's the Indian Summer that did it. I have been seduced to an imbecile's paradise by an old whore; I have been throttled and sapped of strength and volition by the old weary Lilith of the year.<sup>43</sup>

*Light in August* is a narrative which contains murders, manhunts and births as well as missing persons, love affairs and sexual awakenings, yet the blockages to movement and lack of agency are striking. Gail Hightower, the disgraced former minister who is embroiled in the dual narratives of Joe Christmas and Lena Grove, is a fine example of this. Presumably Hightower did exert influence and have an effect upon his community when employed as the local minister. However, in scenes related analeptically, the public exposure of his wife's affair and subsequent suicide render him powerless and inconsequential. Hightower is sacked, told to leave Jefferson, beaten and tied to a tree by the Ku Klux Klan – yet he refuses to leave. While this refusal could indicate a certain principled stance (a refusal to be exiled) it is, in fact, presented in much more stultifying terms. Hightower simply cannot seem to move – he is literally stuck, referring to himself at one point as 'not in life anymore'.<sup>44</sup> His festering is even manifested in his bodily form: he is a corpulent figure who moves slowly and whose home and body emit a putrid odour. When Byron enters Hightower's house 'his nostrils whiten and tauten with the thick smell of the stale, mankept house' (Joanna Burden, though in a grander style, lives in a

similarly unkempt, untouched house that is reminiscent of Miss Havisham's Satis House).<sup>45</sup>

Hightower himself remains 'oblivious of the odour in which he lives – that smell of people who no longer live in life: that odour of overplump dessication and stale linen as though a precursor to the tomb'.<sup>46</sup> It is this characterization, or rather this placing of a character in a kind of spatio-temporal limbo, that then gives greater 'atmosphere' to a particular description of Hightower in the heat:

It was hot. He [Hightower] is in his shirt sleeves, tall, with thin backclad legs and spare, gaunt arms and shoulders, and with that flabby and obese stomach like some monstrous pregnancy. The shirt is white, but it is not fresh; his collar is soiled, as is the white lawn cravat carelessly knotted, and he has not shaved for two or three days. His panama hat is soiled, and beneath it, between hat and skull against the heat, the edge and corners of a soiled handkerchief protrude.<sup>47</sup>

The body of Hightower, here, merges with the very garments which he is equally unable to keep clean – the conduit of sweat plastering his clothes to his skin. The process of decay, while its own form of activity, accrues on that (Hightower) which fails to move and thereby escape its clutches. Emblematic of such stasis is Hightower's 'obese stomach': a pregnancy 'monstrous' because it will never reach term, never produce offspring and generate succession.

In a paradoxical variation on this theme, Lena Grove (whose pregnancy does come to fruition in the course of the novel) also fails to move. In fact, the novel begins with Lena on the road, having come 'all the way from Alabama a-walking' in search of her lover Lucas Burch, who fled upon hearing of her pregnancy.<sup>48</sup> In the course of the narrative Lena finds Lucas, going by the assumed name of Joe Brown, gives birth to her child and engenders a curiously reticent passion in Byron Bunch, yet by the

end of the novel she is still on the road trying to catch up with Burch. She now has a baby to look after and Byron in tow but, apart from that, nothing has changed – and this is despite the very clear rejection, and fleeing, of Burch for a second time. Paradoxically, Lena's undeniable movement through space and time is thus a manifestation of a more fundamental, personal, non-movement of thought, or feeling – or even mood. The same effect is evident in *As I Lay Dying*, where the journey taken by the Bundren family literally involves movement and travel but which, also literally, is about transporting precisely what can never move or act again: Addie's dead body.

As the central character of *Light in August*, one would expect the analysis being advanced here to be particularly relevant to the figure of Joe Christmas, and this is, indeed, the case. In fact, one of the key ways in which Joe's stasis and passivity are presented is very similar to Lena's travelling without moving. Following the final break that he makes with his brutally puritanical upbringing at the hands of Mr McEachern, Joe runs away. The narration proceeds:

from that night the thousand streets ran as one street, with imperceptible corners and changes of scene [...] The street ran into Oklahoma and Missouri and as far south as Mexico and then back north to Chicago and Detroit and then back south again and at last to Mississippi. It was fifteen years long [...] It ran through yellow wheat fields waving beneath the fierce yellow days of labour and hard sleep in haystacks.<sup>49</sup>

Joe thus traverses a huge geographical area over a significant period of time – only for this stage of the narrative to be encapsulated by the image of a single street and by a complete lack of character development. Significantly, the journey he takes is also specifically evoked through the image of 'fierce yellow days'.

Like Lena, Joe travels without moving, and, like Hightower, once in Jefferson he becomes stuck in its environs. Joe drifts into town, taking a menial job at the sawmill, but is soon caught up in a compulsive affair with Joanna Burden. While this reason for staying in town, together with his lucrative activities in trading whiskey, has a certain logic, his actions following his killing of Miss Burden are more irrational. Unlike his previous traversing of various States, after the murder of Miss Burden Joe hardly runs at all and is arrested in the neighbouring town – he doesn't even leave the county. Even more significantly, when Joe then escapes police custody he simply hides out in Hightower's house. The night after his death the people of Jefferson wonder why 'he had taken refuge in the place which he did, where he must have known he would be certainly run to earth, and why when that occurred he neither surrendered nor resisted. It was as though he had set out and made his plans to passively commit suicide'.<sup>50</sup> Rather than any sense of rational decision-making what seems more readily apparent here is Joe's inability to move, to act, to grasp the conditions of his existence. Like Hightower and Miss Burden, he is stuck, constricted. It is as though he is debilitated, suffocated, surrounded, enshrouded

There is plainly meaning, or a meaning-effect, here. Joe's passivity in the face of his hunting speaks to a complex self-hatred that is wrapped up in his relationship with the stoical Mr McEachern and his belief (which is perhaps mistaken) that he is of mixed race. It, therefore, connects to a particularly Southern history of Puritanism and racism – a history which Philip Weinstein characterises as 'suffocating'.<sup>51</sup> What seems to be indicated by the background narrative of Joe's life is the difficulty, or even impossibility, of liberating oneself from either this collective history or one's individual past. Joe thus seems bound by his mixed-race, and the connotations which this status has for him, but is equally conditioned by the violent upbringing afforded by McEachern. Crucially, McEachern's violence is pointedly presented as lacking anger. One beating, in particular, is described thus: 'McEachern began

to strike methodically, with slow and deliberate force, still without heat or anger'.<sup>52</sup> Later on in chronological terms, but related earlier in the novel, Joe beats Brown 'with those hard, slow, measured blows, as if he were meting them out by count'.<sup>53</sup> This repetition of a pointedly 'cold' violence serves to depict a personal cycle in which violence begets violence – a sense of the past which clearly resonates meaningfully with the South's traumatic history. But its lack of heat does at least two other things. Firstly, it produces a sense in which effort is conserved in the face of a draining heat: in other words, it is too hot to get angry. Secondly, and more fundamentally, it creates a palpable mood of stasis in which things change only in order to recur endlessly, nullifying the possibility of progress. Allied to this effect is the sense in which the characters depicted almost wholly lack agency and, rather, act as conduits for actions that are, in some way, channelled through them. Something similar can be seen in 'Dry September' where the lynching of Will Mayes occurs because mob rule, governed by a cycle of Southern History, demands it. The only one to resist this is the barber, but although this is a genuine act of individual will it is also powerless to alter the course of events which follow. The barber, having dived out of the car taking Mayes to his death, reports on the mob's return along the heat-baked road: 'the dust swallowed them; the glare and the sound died away. The dust of them hung for a while, but soon the eternal dust absorbed it again'.<sup>54</sup> The seeds of evil-doing and violence are thus seen to be embedded in a scorched landscape that will throw up the same occurrences again and again, independently of individual human volition. What seems paradoxical at first is that even when the sweaty, hot-blooded, mob of 'Dry September' is replaced by the 'cold' violence of *Light in August* the effect is the same – but this is precisely because heat is presented not by its description but by the sense of passivity and stasis which makes it phenomenally palpable.

William Egginton, pulling on the theory of Gumbrecht, describes 'the presence of a performance [as] the very impact of its materiality as change, as perception, as temporality'.<sup>55</sup> Yet what is most striking

about Faulkner's prose, in *Light in August* and other texts, is the very resistance to change and movement (both temporal and spatial) which it exhibits. The final way in which this effect is manifested is in the circuitous, elongated and digressive way in which most of his narratives proceed. Faulkner refuses to tell the story economically or straight. This process is symbolically enacted in the final scenes of *Light in August*, when the unnamed furniture dealer who gives a ride to Lena and Byron continually asks his wife to wait patiently while he tells his tale of them. But it is perhaps most prominent in *Absalom, Absalom!*, as Quentin and Shreve reconstruct facts, imagine scenes and tell each other the story of Thomas Sutpen and his progeny.<sup>56</sup> Yet, although *Absalom, Absalom!* is a narrative which becomes increasingly diffuse through apparent digression it is also one which continually circles around a past that is continually present for Quentin. The novel begins on a 'long still hot weary dead September afternoon' in a 'dim hot airless room with the blinds all closed and fastened for forty-three summers'.<sup>57</sup> From the vantage point of an explicitly cold New England room from which Quentin and Shreve narrate, project and fantasise, this room is often returned to – as are the many explicitly summer days that punctuate the Sutpen history. Liénard rightly argues that 'summer triggers the narrating muscles which grope to retrieve the story' but then interprets those muscles as discerning profound meaning.<sup>58</sup> The final pages of the novel suggest something more elementally physical than this. They see Quentin escorting Miss Coldfield through the 'furnace-breath of air' at Sutpen's Hundred, with this phrase being used on two separate occasions and being accompanied by the continual 'panting of Miss Coldfield'.<sup>59</sup> The scene is immediately followed by a brief conversation between Quentin and Shreve which culminates with Shreve's question of 'why do you hate the South?':

"I don't hate it," Quentin said, quickly, at once, immediately; "I don't hate it," he said. *I don't hate it* he thought, panting in the cold air, the iron New England dark; *I don't. I don't! I don't hate*

*it! I don't hate it!*<sup>60</sup>

Quentin, surrounded by the cold New England air, pants as if hot. He does so because of the *stimmung* of heat which his own fictions have presenced: something which they have produced not just by descriptive prose but by a circularity and repetition which renders him passively unable to escape a certain feeling (or, better still, mood) towards the South. The activity of writing, or telling, the South sees Quentin 'attuned' to the atmosphere of heat which pervades it. He, like us, breathes its aura.

There is, undoubtedly, meaning to be found here. But what has been mounted in the preceding analysis is, in the words of Gernot Böhme, an attempt to 'remember that a work of art is first of all itself something, which possesses its own reality'.<sup>61</sup> The ultimate claim of this essay is thus perhaps one of emphasis – but one which is nevertheless significant and particularly timely given the range of criticism, and indeed critical movements, referenced. This is namely that the primary function of many of the constituent parts of Faulkner's prose are, despite their initial aspect as units of meaning, fundamentally producers of presence. This is to say that rather than presence-effects acting as metaphors for meaningful concepts, several apparently meaningful elements of the novel are, instead, the very features which makes Faulkner's prose creative of a world which bears the light touch of *stimmung*. Meaning, in Faulkner, is hot.

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<sup>1</sup> Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *Production of Presence: What Meaning Cannot Convey* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 106.

<sup>2</sup> William Faulkner, *Light in August* (London: Vintage, 2005), 233.

<sup>3</sup> Ethan Kleinberg, "Presence in *Absentia*," in *Presence: Philosophy, History, and Cultural Theory for the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Ranjan Ghosh and Ethan Kleinberg (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2013), 12.



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- <sup>4</sup> Mark Bevir, "Meaning , Truth, and Phenomenology," in *Presence: Philosophy, History, and Cultural Theory for the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Ranjan Ghosh and Ethan Kleinberg (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2013), 46.
- <sup>5</sup> Gumbrecht, *Production of Presence: What Meaning Cannot Convey*: 53-4.
- <sup>6</sup> Ewa Domanska, "The Material Presence of the Past," *History and Theory* 45, no. 3 (2006): 337.
- <sup>7</sup> Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1993); Daniel Tiffany, *Toy Medium: Materialism and Modern Lyric* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000); Bill Brown, *A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2003); Peter Schwenger, *The Tears of Things: Melancholy and Physical Objects* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2006); Steven Connor, *Beckett, Modernism and the Material Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).
- <sup>8</sup> Jonathan Flatley, *Affective Mapping: Melancholia and the Politics of Modernism* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 2008).
- <sup>9</sup> For example, see Elaine Scarry, ed. *Literature and the Body: Essays on Populations and Persons* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), xx-xxi.
- <sup>10</sup> Gumbrecht, *Production of Presence: What Meaning Cannot Convey*: 53.
- <sup>11</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Hermeneutik, Ästhetik, Praktische Philosophie*, ed. Carsten Dutt, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition (Heidelberg, 2000), p. 63. Quoted in *ibid.*, 64.
- <sup>12</sup> William Egginton, "Performance and Presence, Analysis of a Modern Aporia," *Journal of Literary Theory* 1, no. 1 (2007): 6.
- <sup>13</sup> In his native Germany the most prominent names here are Friedrich Kittler and Siegfried Zielinski.
- <sup>14</sup> Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *Atmosphere, Mood, Stimmung: On a Hidden Potential of Literature*, trans. Erik Butler (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012).
- <sup>15</sup> ———, *Production of Presence: What Meaning Cannot Convey*: 2.
- <sup>16</sup> Gumbrecht, *Atmosphere, Mood, Stimmung: On a Hidden Potential of Literature*: 3-4.
- <sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.
- <sup>18</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1978), 174.
- <sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 176.
- <sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 177 & 76.
- <sup>21</sup> Flatley, *Affective Mapping: Melancholia and the Politics of Modernism*: 16.

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- <sup>22</sup> For two excellent recent collections on mood see Rita Felski and Susan Fraiman, eds., *In the Mood*, special issue of *New Literary History* 43 (2012) and Ben Highmore and Jenny Bourne Taylor, eds., *Introducing Mood Work*, special issue of *New Formations* 82 (2014).
- <sup>23</sup> Gumbrecht, *Atmosphere, Mood, Stimmung: On a Hidden Potential of Literature*: 14 & 20.
- <sup>24</sup> Vincent P. Pecora, "Be Here Now: Mimesis and the History of Representation," in *Presence: Philosophy, History, and Cultural Theory for the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Ranjan Ghosh and Ethan Kleinberg (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2013).
- <sup>25</sup> Gernot Böhme, "Atmosphere as the Fundamental Concept of a New Aesthetics," *Thesis Eleven* 36(1993): 117.
- <sup>26</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Birth to Presence*, trans. Brian Holmes (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), 389.
- <sup>27</sup> Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1984).
- <sup>28</sup> Donald M. Kartiganer and Ann J. Abadie, eds., *Faulkner and the Natural World* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1999). See also Susan Scott Parrish, "Faulkner and the Outer Weather of 1927," *American Literary History* 24, no. 1 (2012).
- <sup>29</sup> In his seminal study, Cleanth Brooks quotes Malcolm Cowley's statement that 'no other American writer takes such delight in the weather', yet very little mention of the weather then ensues. Cleanth Brooks, *William Faulkner: The Yoknapatawpha Country* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1963).
- <sup>30</sup> Marie H. Liénard, "Faulkner's Poetics of Heat: Summer's Curse," *The Faulkner Journal* 14, no. 1 (1998): 53.
- <sup>31</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>32</sup> The existence of such *stimmung* in cinema has been written about by Robert Sinnerbrink, who argues that this sense of mood 'is not simply a subjective experience or a private state of mind; it describes, rather, how a (fictional) world is expressed or disclosed via a shared affective attunement orienting the spectator within that world'. Robert Sinnerbrink, "*Stimmung*: Exploring the Aesthetics of Mood," *Screen* 53, no. 2 (2012): 148.
- <sup>33</sup> William Styron, 'As He Lay Dead, A Bitter Grief', *Life* 23 (20 July 1962), quoted in Liénard, "Faulkner's Poetics of Heat: Summer's Curse."
- <sup>34</sup> Faulkner, *Light in August*: 50.
- <sup>35</sup> ———, *As I Lay Dying* (London: Vintage, 1996), 54 & 26.
- <sup>36</sup> ———, *Sanctuary* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970), 10. ———, *Light in August*: 28.
- <sup>37</sup> ———, *Sanctuary*: 147.
- <sup>38</sup> ———, *The Wild Palms* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970), 184.
- <sup>39</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge, 1992), 102.
- <sup>40</sup> Ibid., 315.

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- <sup>41</sup> Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying*: 37.
- <sup>42</sup> ———, *Sanctuary*: 6.
- <sup>43</sup> ———, *The Wild Palms*: 83.
- <sup>44</sup> ———, *Light in August*: 226.
- <sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 224.
- <sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 239.
- <sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 231.
- <sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.
- <sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 168-9.
- <sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 333.
- <sup>51</sup> Philip Weinstein, *Unknowing: The Work of Modernist Fiction* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005), 160.
- <sup>52</sup> Faulkner, *Light in August*: 114.
- <sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.
- <sup>54</sup> ———, *Collected Stories* (New York: Random House, 1950), 180.
- <sup>55</sup> Eggington, "Performance and Presence, Analysis of a Modern Aporia," 9.
- <sup>56</sup> The sense of temporality evoked by, amongst other techniques, the retardation of narrative is written about in a slightly different take on phenomenology and literary criticism in Roman Ingarden, *The Literary Work of Art: An Investigation on the Borderlines of Ontology, Logic, and Theory of Literature*, trans. George G. Grabowicz (Evanston.: Northwestern University Press, 1973).
- <sup>57</sup> William Faulkner, *Absalom! Absalom!* (London: Vintage, 2005), 7.
- <sup>58</sup> Liénard, "Faulkner's Poetics of Heat: Summer's Curse," 58.
- <sup>59</sup> Faulkner, *Absalom! Absalom!*: 364-72.
- <sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 378.
- <sup>61</sup> Böhme, "Atmosphere as the Fundamental Concept of a New Aesthetics," 115.